

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1944

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Week of May 29, 1944

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Career Angel"

Complete reviews appear in this issue

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

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NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

"Career Angel"

Comedy by Gerard M. Murray, staged by Don Appell, setting by Carl Kent. Presented by Andrew Billings and Joseph Dicks at the National Theatre, May 23, 1944.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
May 24, 1944

'Career Angel' At the National

By ROBERT GARLAND

ONCE upon a time not very long ago, a simply charming and charmingly simple little comedy called "Career Angel" was displayed for all to see up on the stage of the Blackfriars Guild in West 57th st. We who go down to our seats on passes went out of our ways to see it. For the most part, we found it worthy. And, in our long-suffering papers, we came right out and said so.

One long flight up, from the relentlessly hard-bottomed chairs of the Blackfriars' showshop, "Career Angel" was admirably amateur in the real meaning of the word. That is to say, playwright and players were doing what they most liked to do, because they most liked to do it. And practically for nothing! There was an engagingly non-professional quality about the entire endeavor.

Now, this "Career Angel" has found its way downtown, following, I fear, the slanting course of Broadway. In its journey south from 57th to 41st st., from the Blackfriars' Theatre to the National, it has picked up no little of Broadway's brittle artifice and lost quite a bit of its initial soft simplicity. It also has picked up Eleanor Roosevelt, along with her guardian angel. They, too, seem wrong.

Angel's Holiday

The action still takes place in the Superior's Office of the Bosco Institute, a liberal-minded home for orphaned boys, conducted on the honor system by the gentle and elderly Brother Seraphim. Brother Seraphim has a sense of fair play, a sense of humor and a sense of timing. But, in spite of this trio of valuable, almost essential, senses, the Bosco Institute has fallen upon evil financial days. The money, the absolutely necessary money, just isn't coming in. And Brother Fidelis, the treasurer, is worried. Well he may be! He knows, if Brother Seraphim doesn't, that you can't run the Bosco Institute on love, kindness and God's good blessing. These things help, of course, but with no dollars in the bank with which to back them up, they're small use to the butcher and the baker.

As things turn out, it is Brother Seraphim's Guardian Angel, visible only to his very human responsibility, who takes a vacation from Paradise to set the Bosco Institute in order. This Guardian Angel—or Angel Guardian, as they call him at the National—is both worldly-wise and meddlesome. He fixes things, all right. On a vacation from his admittedly dull hereafter, he has a rare time doing so.

Heavenly Fixer

How he fixes things with the help of General Sherman, some long-lost letters and his supernatural powers—super-duper, really—is the story "Career Angel" has to tell. For the most part, "Career Angel" tells it with quiet and effective dialogue. Only when Playwright Father Murray—merely Gerard M. Murray on the programs—turns mistakenly to melodrama, does his quiet effectiveness desert him.

Under the professional direction of Don Appell, this "Career Angel" doesn't hit the proper note in 41st st. At any rate, it doesn't hit the note it hit last November in 57th st. Now, it may be slicker and quicker than it was six months ago. But, by so making it, the directorial Mr. Appell has sacrificed the spiritual—yes, spiritual—aspect that made the earlier version of the comedy so endearing.

Whitford Kane, the eternal grave-digger of "Hamlet," is fine as the unworshipful Brother Seraphim. The Angel Guardian of Glenn Anders has somehow overlooked the mellow mockery David Carman Jones gave to the role uptown. But, most of all, I miss the

THE CAST

Brother Gregory.....	Donald Foster
Bonnie McAdams.....	Allen Rich
Willie Garvey.....	Charles Nevil
Brother Fidelis.....	Ronald Telfer
Kurt Rheinhold.....	Tony Miller
Brother Seraphim.....	Whitford Kane
Angel Guardian.....	Glenn Anders
Hurdles.....	Alvin Allen
Gilnaky.....	Robert Ramsen
Thompson.....	Robert Lee
Kinn.....	Charleton Carpenter
Bruno Chevovski.....	Michael Dreyfuss
Barr.....	Wendell Whitten
Brother Ubaldus.....	Mason Adams
Duval Devois.....	Dorn Alexander
Al Fuller.....	Gerald Matthews
Billy.....	David Kelly

gone but not forgotten Willie Garvey of David Kelly and the Kurt Rheinhold of Eric Ladd. . . . It is in me to wish that Father Murray's "Career Angel" had kept away from Broadway.

NEW YORK POST
May 24, 1944

'Career Angel' Comes Down to Earth at the National Theatre

By WILLELLA WALDORF

LAST November the Blackfriars' Guild, an experimental organization operated by Catholic priests, produced "Career Angel," a comedy by Gerard M. Murray, at its little second floor theatre in West 57th Street. The author is himself a Catholic priest and his play was tossed together in the first place, we understand, to be acted by a group of teen-age school boys, aided by a few teachers. It calls, therefore, for an all-male cast and some of it proved pleasantly amusing in the unpretentious but generally competent production by the Blackfriars.

Although "Career Angel" was amateurish and inept in some respects, it had some simple truths to state on the subject of faith, and the Guardian Angel who invaded an orphanage for boys operated by Catholic priests somewhere in the South was a merry fellow, amiably informal and even, on occasion, positively slangy.

The play attracted sufficient attention uptown to interest a trio of producers in a Broadway version, which was duly presented last night at the National Theatre.

Heavy Handed Doctoring

Since its tryout, the author has apparently been induced to make a number of additions and corrections in his script, and unless we are much mistaken, the not so fine hand of sundry play doctors may be detected. Instead of improving it, they have succeeded in making it slangier, more obvious and less interesting. A lot of jokes about Mrs. Roosevelt have been introduced and the German spy plot is still to the fore.

Nor does the Broadway production show much improvement over the semi-amateur performance at the Blackfriars. Except for Whitford Kane as Brother Seraphim, whose Guardian Angel is a real pal, the present company is not impressive. Mr. Kane, as usual, is a beguiling old fellow, and although the play gives him limited opportunity, he has one scene that is very touching when the Brothers decide to send him to a sanitarium because he will persist in conversing with his Angel.

House Full of Angels

Don Appell's direction is by no means as good as Dennis Garney's was in 57th Street and there is a stagey quality about the per-

formance that makes it clumsy and synthetic. Glenn Anders as the Angel seemed ill at ease in his assignment much of the time and was in so much of a hurry to pour out his lines that some of them never came out intelligibly at all.

Ronald Telfer had his moments as Brother Fidelis, the practical, down-to-earth member of the faculty, but the direction often made him verge upon a musical comedy conception of the part, while the boys in general were just too cute for words, notably a precocious stage child named Charles Nevil who will probably in due time become a precocious screen child.

On the whole we found "Career Angel" a disappointment in its Broadway reincarnation. The first-night audience was so vociferous in its applause that it soon became pretty obvious Mr. Anders wasn't the only Angel in the house.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
May 24, 1944

Career Angel, on Broadway, Very Superior Sort of Fun

By BURTON RASCOE

GERARD M. MURRAY'S little masterpiece of satire and mysticism, wit and sentiment, earthy fun and spiritual wisdom, Career Angel, was given a polished professional Broadway production last night before a highly appreciative audience at the National. Laughter and applause and (at one august moment) reverential attention, were the order of the evening.

When Career Angel was presented by the semi-amateur Catholic group, the Blackfriars, on Nov. 18, 1943, at their tiny upstairs theater in West 57th St., I described it as "one of the whitest, most intellectually satisfying, most refreshing comedies that has been produced in New York in years and years."

I see no reason to revise that verdict. The comedy, as presented at the National, has been somewhat revamped; a melodramatic scene which was a flaw in the original production, has been wisely dropped; and one or two minor crudities have been eliminated. The play, as it stands, has a smoother finish now and doubtless some of the revisions have been made in behalf of what the producers felt would be "wider audience appeal."

Changes in Script

While deferring to their judgment in this matter, I think they toned down the hilarity of the original by eliminating the psychiatrist who was brought in to treat Brother Seraphim for mental disorder; by shortening the scene in which Brother Seraphim is thoroughly exasperated with his angel guardian; and by dropping the scene in which Brother Seraphim is bewildered and bedeviled by the visible fruit of success—plagued by importunate representatives of radio, movies, newspapers, magazines and book publishing firms.

The original had a worldliness and audacity about it which caused me to write, "Suspicion arises that Father Murray has an impious fondness for the writings of a Frenchman whose books are conspicuously on the Index Expurgatorius—the old Anatole of The Revolt of the Angels and The Amethyst Ring." This worldliness and audacity has been slightly modified for Broadway consumption.

Father Murray is assistant priest at the church of Our Lady of Mercy, Forest Hills, L. I.

At all events, more emphasis is placed upon the spiritual values in the Broadway version of Career Angel than in the sectarian version, and the comical and satirical values are, to that extent, kept in second place. But I wish they hadn't cut out the eminent Euro-

pean psychiatrist who ended up by being so entertained by Brother Seraphim that he was cured of his own neuroses.

Angel as Manager

The play has to do with the strange experience of Brother Seraphim, an actor who left the stage to enter a Catholic order and found an orphanage. His charity and benevolence vastly exceeded his practical sense, and his "ramshackle dump" (as his ghostly familiar calls it) is hopelessly in debt when his tough-minded angel guardian takes over the management of his affairs—not altogether unselfishly, because he is working for a "career" in heaven. When the angel guardian manifests himself to Brother Seraphim, the latter's colleagues (who are modern and scientific in their thinking) believe the old boy has gone daffy. The very intellectual Brother Fidella, indeed, never believes in this "angel guardian" business, even after strange things happen which put the orphanage in the chips—or even after he gets a resounding kick in the cask through an unseen agency.

Whitford Kane is excellent as the sweet and simple Brother Seraphim; Ronald Telfer as the astirring skeptic; Brother Fidella reaps all the advantages his comic role gives him; Glenn Anders is properly earthy and realistic as the angel, and Mason Andrews and Donald Foster round out the principal adult characters satisfactorily. I don't think the kids are as good as the amateurs in the original production, but they do well enough. Career Angel is a rare treat that should be on every literate playgoer's list of shows to be seen. It is very superior sort of fun.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
May 24, 1944

'Career Angel' One More Wraith With Good Intentions, Bad Plot

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A BALLPLAYER who looks great on a sandlot may appear less than dazzling in the exacting precincts of Yankee Stadium. A play which looks like a hit in the friendly, semi-pro atmosphere of the Blackfriars Theatre may not be equal to the demands of the commercial Broadway stage—and that it what happened last night to "Career Angel" at the National.

I wouldn't say that last night's production represented the best professional standards, for some of it was sloppy; but the best of it was brought out well enough, and the well enough is not good enough. Gerard M. Murray's comedy about a ghost and some priests and orphans is softly amiable and lacks the sturdiness theatregoers have been demanding this season.

Father Murray, the Author, is a Forest Hills, N. Y., priest. His play won many admirers when the Blackfriars presented it a year or so ago on W. 5th St., so Andrew Billings, Joseph Dicks and David Shay arranged to give it the new all-Equity showing.

A Talking Angel

Father Murray's ghost isn't a ghost, exactly; he is an angel—the angel guardian of a lovable old priest whose heart is wrapped up in a busted-down orphan's institute on the coast of Georgia. But, like all the ghosts who have appeared since "Billie Spirit," this angel can talk to a certain party and be seen by same, but is invisible and inaudible elsewhere. Like all the ghosts, he wants to give mere mortals a helping hand.

In this instance, the good fathers who run the kids' institute need help, for they are out of money and the mortgage is about to come due. The angel guardian of one of the padres, Brother Seraphim, comes to bat.

He hints to Seraphim, first, that some old letters in a trunk will reveal that the institute is a historic place because General Sherman

missed it on his march through Georgia. Being historic, it will arouse nationwide interest and contributions will pour in. Just how this comes about is too complicated to explain here—and anyhow I didn't believe it when I saw it last night.

Secondly, the angel hints to Seraphim that a respected neighbor is a Nazi saboteur, and there is some spy stuff that is less credible than it should be to get by.

Plotting Is Weak

When Father Murray is inventing a plot for "Career Angel" he is beyond his capabilities, apparently. When he is merely describing four priests and a bunch of orphaned boys he is convincing, amusing and interesting. Some of his clerics and even his angel talk crisp slang, and one of the brothers is given to sharp, nasty gags, some of which are good.

Whitford Kane, as Brother Seraphim, gives the expected Kane performance—warm and upright. Glenn Anders, done up in a flowing light robe and gray-painted hair, plays the angel like Noel Coward having a bout with Gertrude Lawrence to see which could clip syllables sharper and faster. Ronald Telfer and Donald Foster are the other two priests, and among the youngsters in the orphanage are Charles Nevil, Tony Miller and Michael Dreyfus.

NEW YORK SUN
May 24, 1944

'Career Angel,' Comedy With All-male Cast, Has Premiere at the National

By HERRICK BROWN

"CAREER ANGEL," the little comedy which Gerard M. Murray, a Forest Hills priest, wrote originally for the boy actors at Cathedral High School in Brooklyn, finally took the leap to Broadway last evening. The jump from scholastic halls in Kings county to the bright glare of the Times Square scene being what it is, that the Rev. Father Murray's drama did not land entirely on its feet in its premiere at the National Theater is not surprising.

Manhattan, but not Broadway, saw "Career Angel" briefly last year. The Blackfriars Guild gave it for a score or so performances shortly before the Christmas holidays, and it was the attention it attracted then that led Andrew Billings, Joseph Dicks and David Shay to sponsor it for big-time production. Since then it has been revamped a trifle to point it up for Broadway audiences (Mrs. Roosevelt's guiding angel is dragged into the picture now) and in the process it seems apparent that some of the charm of the original script has slipped away.

In its premiere last night it emerged as a somewhat uneven work. In its best moments it is moving and human and spontaneously humorous. At other times it turns too readily to gags for the slick laugh and indulges too freely in clapping for its own good.

The priest-playwright has the real feel of the theater, however, and he has hit upon an excellent idea for his play. To set the guardian angel of the lovable old founder of a Catholic orphan's home on the coast of Georgia to the task of saving the institution from closing for lack of funds offers plenty of chances for both comedy and drama, and the author achieves his goal for at least part of the evening. His angel is a gay chap, and when he and Brother Seraphim are scheming to salvage the Bosco Institute through some historic letters hidden since Civil War days in the institution's barn the comedy rolls gleefully along. When the Rev. Father Murray rings in a Nazi spy plot, however, "Career Angel" gets out of hand and slumps into the mediocre.

Whitford Kane plays Brother Seraphim and

evolves a stage portrait for Broadway to cherish. When Brother Seraphim is trying to persuade his bewildered colleagues that the angel whom they cannot see is steering them safely out of their troubles and particularly when he is striving to convince his old friend Brother Gregory of his sanity, Mr. Kane brings out all the warmth and deep understanding and faith that the Rev. Father Murray has skillfully written into the part.

Glenn Anders is the angel and despite a tendency to sloop over now and then on the side of imphishness, makes the representative from the spirit world a likable and amusing fellow. Donald Foster brings sincerity to the role of Brother Gregory and Mason Adams gives an equally fine performance as Brother Ubaldus, who delves most enthusiastically into historical matters. In the very practical Brother Fidella, the author has written a part with less depth than the others, but Ronald Telfer makes him at least an entertaining figure.

Unfortunately the youngsters who play the orphans in the all-male cast are never able to match the acting of their elders, and this proves a definite drawback to the evening's proceedings.

The Rev. Father Murray sends his audience out chuckling with a neat final curtain, but despite some effective scenes and the fine role for Mr. Kane, "Career Angel" hardly proves of enough stature for a whole Broadway evening.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
May 24, 1944

More Orphan Than Angel

By LOUIS KRÖNENBERGER

THIS has been a plump season for fantasy, what with Death, Conscience, ghosts, spirits, and now an angel gliding about Broadway. But though these supernatural figures have more than once improved the lot of somebody or other in the plays, they have yet to shower any blessings upon the playwrights. Career Angel, like its predecessors, is just a might-have-been. The whimsical idea behind it is agreeable enough, and the writing has moments of mild humor; but most of Career Angel is forced and tenuous. The play cannot find its feet, let alone spread its wings.

The story is concerned with a financially desperate Catholic orphanage in Georgia. But before the crash comes, kindly Brother Seraphim's guardian angel appears and tells him of some valuable old letters hidden in the barn. Needless to say, the letters eventually save the orphanage; but in the meantime various other clerics sniff and scoff. Brother Seraphim's sanity is very much in question, the orphans cavort, and—without much reason—a pro-Nazi saboteur churns up some mischief.

Underneath his fooling, Father Murray would seem to be making a strong plea for faith as opposed to reason. Although this tends to be oversteered, it is not on philosophical but on dramatic grounds that Career Angel runs into trouble. It makes strenuous efforts to be jolly, but never manages to be very amusing. There is something too strained and arch about it. For one thing, the guardian angel himself is rather a mixed blessing. And once his little plan is uncorked, the plot has nowhere to go; it can only fight a series of delaying actions and repeat the same clerical jokes until 11 o'clock.

There is nothing noteworthy about the production either. Carl Kent has provided a nice set, and Whitford Kane makes a likeable Brother Seraphim. Glenn Anders has himself a good time as the angel but is not entirely effective. Donald Foster, Ronald Telfer and Mason Adams play the other priests with varying skill.